HOME CULTURES VOLUME 9, ISSUE 1 PP 105–112

BOOK REVIEWS

CONSUMER CULTURE: HISTORY, THEORY AND POLITICS

by Roberta Sassatelli (Sage, 2007)

GENDER AND CONSUMPTION: DOMESTIC CULTURES AND THE COMMERCIALISATION OF EVERYDAY LIFE

edited by Emma Casey and Lydia Martens (Ashgate, 2007)

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HOME CULTURES DOI: 10.2752/175174212X13202276383931

BUYING FOR THE HOME: SHOPPING FOR THE DOMESTIC FROM THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT

edited by David Hussey and Margaret Ponsonby (Ashgate, 2008)

In this review I focus on three intriguing books, which appeared in 2007 and 2008. I found it productive to place them alongside each other, as they all investigate dichotomies inherent in consumption. While Roberta Sassatelli organized her book, *Consumer Culture*, around explicit dichotomies of production/consumption, rationality/irrationality, freedom/oppression, Casey and Martens' edited volume *Gender and Consumption* touches on domestic consumption and the relationship between private and public. Finally, the edited volume *Buying for the Home*, by Hussey and Ponsonby, focuses on negotiations between market places and homemaking.

Alongside Daniel Miller's *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies* (Routledge, 1995) and Don Slater's *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Polity Press, 1997), Sassatelli's study belongs to the most useful textbooks on consumption written in English. While Miller and his contributors offer an excellent review of cross-disciplinary approaches towards consumption and Slater's book shows how consumer culture has been conceptualized by modern theories, Sassatelli, an Associate Professor of Cultural Sociology at the University of Milan, provides an exemplary introduction to consumer culture for both students and scholars.

The multifaceted book moves from a history of the rise of Western consumer culture to an analysis of numerous theoretical approaches towards consumption and consumer agency, and finally to the various contexts and politics of consumption. Adopting a constructivist approach, Sassatelli concentrates on "[t]he centrality of the 'consumer', the lengthy and contested historical processes which led to its formation, the many theoretical portrayals of consumer agency, the political implications of conceiving contemporary culture as consumer culture" (p. 6). To address these concerns the text is divided into three parts: (1) "The Rise of Consumer Culture," (2) "Theories of Consumer Agency," (3) "The Politics of Consumption," which have been organized around three key dichotomies: production/

consumption; rationality/irrationality; and freedom/oppression. The book consists of an introduction, eight chapters concluded by an epilogue ("Consumers, Consumer Culture(s) and the Practices of Consumption"), suggestions for further reading and resources, references, and index.

In the first part, Sassatelli provides an anti-productivist interpretation of the rise of consumer culture. Drawing upon the works of Colin Campbell, Neil McKendrick, Jan De Vries, and Werner Sombart, she shows how consumer culture was not only the consequence of the Industrial Revolution. In fact, she argues that significant trends contributing to its development appeared already in seventeenth-century Holland and eighteenth-century England. Sassatelli favors multi-factor explanations, putting an emphasis on aspects such as promotional techniques, hedonistic ethics, commerce, and the spread of luxurious, exotic, and colonial goods. Amongst the crucial shifts that characterized the consolidation of modern patterns of consumption, Sassatelli identifies the development of the great European cities and the transformation of retail—especially the emergence of department stores, advertising, and the development of the bourgeois home.

The second part of the Sassatelli's monograph deals with how people define, perceive, and govern their relationship with commodities and how consumer agency has been conceptualized by economic, sociological, and anthropological theorists. Divided into three chapters around the themes of Utility and Social Competition, Needs Manipulation and Simulation, and Taste, Identity and Practices, this is the strongest part of the book. Paying special attention to the works of Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, Mary Douglas, Daniel Miller, George Ritzer, Georg Simmel, Werner Sombart, Thorstein Veblen, and the Frankfurt School (surprisingly, Zygmunt Bauman is not discussed here), Sassatelli argues that consumption cannot be reduced to one element or the other of the dichotomies discussed—rational or irrational, active or passive; instead, she claims that consumption is a contested field, related to social practices and meanings. Drawing on Bourdieu, Sassatelli proposes the relatively autonomous and intriguing concept of consumer capital ("the result of previous consumer experiences which are themselves linked, but irreducible, to class and formal education, involving the workings of large mass-oriented institutions both within the market … and without it …," p. 95), which I found especially interesting.

The final part of the book centers on the dichotomy between freedom and oppression, examining various political dimensions of consumer culture and arguing that it is exactly the ambivalence of consumption with regard to this dichotomy that makes it a field of political action (p. 113). In particular, Sassatelli looks at advertising, anti- and pro-consumerist cultural representations of consumption, alternative forms of consumption, globalization and localization,

commoditization and de-commoditization (she speaks also of normalization of consumption, pp.154–60), and various consumption settings and contexts (e.g. consumption as leisure, shopping centers, McDonaldization, the home).

The book is an easy read, written in an accessible, student-friendly style, including helpful illustrative figures and diagrams. Each chapter is followed by a summary (and notes), and there are excellent suggestions for further reading at the end of the book. Oddly enough, the literature mentioned in this appendix does not appear in the otherwise outstanding bibliography. Though the monograph contains an index, it is not very helpful and readers, especially students, might appreciate more entries.

Sassatelli's *Consumer Culture* is an amazing synthesis of the literature on consumption. Despite the vast number of books and papers published in this field, especially in last twenty years, the up-to-date bibliography is huge and encompasses both classical works and recent studies. Quite impressively, Sassatelli has managed not only to include a very considerable amount of relevant literature, but also to depict and analyze the main features of the theories mentioned and to place them within the framework of her own study. To conclude with a pleasing paradox, in her book organized around dichotomies Sassatelli has succeeded in overcoming yet another dichotomy—writing a textbook without being shallow and simplifying, a textbook that is simultaneously an intriguing scholarly work.

Edited by Emma Casey (Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Kingston University) and Lydia Martens (Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Keele University), *Gender and Consumption: Domestic Cultures and the Commercialisation of Everyday Life*, a collection of feminist essays, draws on anthropological, sociological, and historical perspectives on femininity and consumption. It aims to fill the gap in feminist studies, which have tended to avoid (especially domestic) consumption (Joanne Hollows' essay in the book focuses precisely on the reasons why this should be the case).

The title of the volume is perhaps slightly misleading, as all chapters but one (Irene Cieraad on interiors of boys' and girls' bedrooms) concentrate on women's consumption. So *Gender and Domestic Consumption* might have been a more suitable title, as domesticity clearly provides the theoretical focus and would also clarify the emphasis on women and absence of men in the discussions. The essays included are fascinating and of excellent academic quality. They all focus on various facets of domestic consumption, from organizing children's birthday parties to laundry practices and the UK National Lottery. The book comprises an introduction, eleven chapters divided into three parts and an afterword: "Gender, Consumer Culture and Promises of Betterment in Late Modernity." As the editors write there, the main themes of the volume are "the relationship between the public and private, between the market and domestic spheres and how

we may understand the processes and cultural responses whereby the opportunities on offer in the market place come to be part of domestic and intimate life, and how and why women work creatively on the domestic sphere's infrastructure and its material culture" (pp. 220–1).

The first part of the book focuses on the "Commercialisation of Domestic Life in Historical Perspective." Drawing together the Ideal Home Exhibition, the growth of suburbia, decline of domestic service, shopping and department stores, and oral testimonies, the fascinating essay by Judy Giles illuminates the consequences of profound changes in consumption for both working and middle class female identities in Britain between 1920 and 1950. In another chapter, Joanne Hollows addresses the reasons why domestic consumption and cooking in particular were marginalized within second-wave feminism. In the final paper of this part Susan E. Reid makes an argument for the centrality of consumption during the Khrushchev era, seeing women's consumption as a crucial concern in the Soviet response to the Cold War.

In the second part of the book on "Private/Public Dynamics in Gender and Consumption," Alison Clarke examines children's birthday parties. In this intriguing study, she reveals how children's parties have become both more elaborate and commercialized and related to a broader gendered sociality of mothers. Clarke argues that women use this appropriation of the market in order to create alternative ways of mothering. Focusing on commercial social intermediary services, Jacqueline Davidson reveals clashes between the ideals of romantic love and the commoditization of dating agencies. Sharon Boden examines how brides consume their "wedding fantasy" and how they negotiate tensions between romantic intimacy (conceptualized as private) and the public character of their wedding days, arguing that material culture and consumption are crucial for these negotiations. In the chapter on the National Lottery, Emma Casey shows how working class women use gambling to resolve some struggles of everyday lives. Simultaneously, in an attempt to dissociate themselves from irrational and compulsive gamblers, they conceptualize National Lottery as a family-oriented activity. Class and gender is also the focus of the essay by Elizabeth B. Silva, who explores the home environment and especially the space of the kitchen.

Part three is titled "Gender and the Material Culture of the Domestic Sphere" and contains three essays. In her inspiring chapter on the "sensory home," Sarah Pink stresses the sensory qualities of objects acquired and appropriated within homes. Examining laundry practices, she reveals how women have used the experiences of smell, texture, and vision to articulate their experience of home. Drawing on ethnographic work, Dana Wilson-Kovacs analyzes the materiality of intimacy and sexuality, highlighting the importance of consumption for the creation of intimacy and sensual selves. The nuanced analysis

of Irene Cieraad shows how boys' and girls' rooms are gendered and how this materialization of gender has been transformed since the nineteenth century.

In the afterword the editors posit the main themes developed throughout the volume, focusing especially on the moralities of consumption, market, and domestic life.

The collection of essays, *Buying for the Home*, edited by David Hussey and Margaret Ponsonby (both Senior Lecturers at the Department of History, University of Wolverhampton) is an intellectually impressive endeavor. While most studies of consumption examine retail and domestic consumption separately, this book focuses exactly on the linkages, tensions, and negotiations between the sites of retail and the sites of domestic consumption.

The study is neatly and thoughtfully organized to reveal connections between retailers, manufacturers, and homemakers from the seventeenth to the late twentieth centuries. All case studies examine the process of homemaking—in particular the ways how working and middle class homemakers acquire and use various objects to create their homes and how homemakers conceptualize particular objects and means of acquisition. Some essays put the emphasis on retail, others on home and consumers. Ten interdisciplinary case studies encompass a number of geographical locations (Holland, Japan, UK, USA) and various cultural contexts. In this case, "interdisciplinary" refers as much to the authors' background in various disciplines as to the breadth of their methodological influences—social anthropologists using historical data, historians inspired by social anthropology and cultural studies—in order to illuminate the processes of homemaking.

There is an apparent (and indeed very successful) desire for complexity while maintaining the overall focus of the book: though the volume draws on the CHORD (Centre for History of Retail and Distribution) colloquium on shopping and the domestic environment held at the University of Wolverhampton in 2005, it includes two pieces specially commissioned to balance chronological structure and geographical areas covered by the collection. This is such a well-structured and fascinating study that perhaps the only objection I have is a sentence in the introduction promising perspectives including transnational studies (p. 2). Having a background in anthropology and being used to studies examining consumption in settings such diverse as Trinidad and Serbia, I feel that this aim has not been achieved by including only a single study from outside Europe or North America. While the book does deliver a great deal, maybe this one unfulfilled "promise" should have been excised from the introduction.

With contributions from scholars in cultural, social and economic history, social anthropology, and cultural studies, the book is linked by four key themes and dividing the book into four sections. In the first part, "Retail Arenas and the 'Everyday,'" Claire Walsh argues that shopping was considered as a skilled task related to good housewif-

ery in early-modern England and represented a domain of women's independence, even if some tasks could have been delegated to servants. Karin Dannehl, in the same section, examines advertising and the use of kitchen utensils in eighteenth-century England. Finally, David Hussey seeks to redress the balance and looks at Victorian male consumers, revealing that they too were occupied in everyday shopping for the home. The second part, "Shopping for Identities?," includes an essay by Sonia Ashmore on the department store of Liberty and Co., arguing that Liberty's applied the concept of lifestyle already in the nineteenth century, and an essay by Yasugo Suga on the design and consumption of Japanese leather paper. Suga shows how leather paper was produced mainly as an export article for Western consumers looking for "authentic" Japanese products. Focusing on "Fashioning the Domestic: Making and Re-Making the Home through Consumption," the third part of the book contains case studies on the sale and consumption of secondhand furniture in the eighteenth century (Clive Edwards and Margaret Ponsonby), and bridal showers in the USA (Shirley Teresa Wajda). Edwards and Ponsonby show how different sites of retail affected the value and status ascribed to secondhand furniture. Tracing the history of early-twentieth-century bridal showers, Wajda argues that they helped to shape the modern wedding industry and were an important means for the re-imagination and furnishing of the American home. The concluding part of the book, "Consumption for the Home as Cultural Practice," is based mainly on ethnographic studies. Irene Cieraad explores how particular forms of retail influenced and transformed Dutch domestic architecture and "ritual zones" within domestic space. Investigating relationship between lifestyle television, gardening, and garden retail, Lisa Taylor shows how working class gardeners consider lifestyle gardening programs both educational (for "other" working class people) and superficial. In the last chapter, Judy Attfield positions amateur "do-it-yourself" practices as a legitimate subject of research within design history.

Looking at such a variety of areas, this fascinating volume fills a major gap in consumption studies and I hope it will appear also in paperback.

Taken together, the reviewed books illuminate, each in a somewhat different way and from a different angle, the processes of how domesticity and the market define, construct, and limit each other. As such, they make a valuable contribution to our knowledge on "home cultures."